

Senseless censorship

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Olympia doesn't seem to be experiencing any shortages of red pens yet, but it could soon if the House of Representatives' chief clerk keeps at it.

Chief Clerk Rich Nafziger stirred up House Republicans earlier this year for censoring press releases that were — you won't believe this — critical of the Democrats. He blocked them from using words like “disingenuous” and “lack of truth,” saying lawmakers can't impugn their colleagues in taxpayer-funded publications.

As members of the minority party, Republicans' only real power is to critique the majority. It's pretty hard to do that without, well, criticizing.

To complicate matters, Nafziger hasn't made it easy to figure out what's acceptable and what's not. There is no list of Seven Dirty Words You Can't Say in a Press Release; it's not so much what members say, but how they say it.

It's not OK to say “It's not truthful to say this money is being put into reserve.” But a lawmaker can say “I believe it is untrue to say this money is being put into reserve.”

What's next? Requiring members to diagram the sentences in their press releases?

Maintaining civility can be done sensibly — and must be if the House is to avoid stifling dissent.

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Censorship issue lacks common sense

Our Views
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The road to censorship follows a slippery slope.

Majority Democrats in the state House of Representatives have discovered that fact now that they have taken it upon themselves to review and censor what minority Republicans can say in their press releases and newsletters. It's nothing new; the Republicans censored Democrats when the GOP was in the majority.

Earlier this year, Republican Rep. Glenn Anderson of Fall City wanted to use his newsletter to constituents to shoot holes in the Democrats' budget. Anderson wanted to say, "The Enron-type accounting schemes in Olympia continues to be business as usual."

Democrats objected, and the chief clerk asked Anderson to drop "Enron-type" and "schemes" from the sentence. Anderson struck the words and inserted the word "censored" in their place.

Recipients of that newsletter are going to be baffled by the omissions. The word "censored" will raise all kinds of questions.

Are the offending words that offensive in the grand scheme of things? Do they really make the Democrats look that bad? Does it matter?

Conflicting rights

What we have here are conflicting rights and a lack of common sense. When Republicans were in control in the House of Representatives in 1998, they passed a rule to limit what could be said on the House floor. The rule calls for civility and forbids representatives from impugning the opposition. The rule was put in place to stop such hullabaloo as we see in the British parliament, where members routinely interrupt one another, boo and hiss.

The House rule is enforced after the fact, however. Lawmakers don't have to get their floor speeches approved in advance. There's no prior restraint. If someone says something offensive, the other side objects, and the Speaker either allows the remark or chastises the offender. The House civility rule also applies to newsletters and press releases, which is prior restraint.

Slippery slope

One person's criticism is another's outrage. What one person believes is free speech, another might deem "hate speech."

And once the majority party tries to interpret what is and what is not allowable under the rules of decorum — well, it's a slippery slope.

Rep. Anderson is a bit of a bulldog, and when he clamps his teeth onto an issue, there's no letting go. Democrats are learning that lesson the hard way because Anderson is tossing the Democrats' own words back in their faces.

House Majority Leader Lynn Kessler, D-Hoquiam, used the word "gimmick" in a floor speech when she was criticizing a Republican education funding proposal.

Yet when Republican Anderson wanted to use the word "gimmick" to describe Democrats' budget tactics, the censors struck.

Why, Anderson asks, was it OK for a Democrat leader to use the word "gimmick" in a floor speech but the same word was not allowed in a Republican newsletter?

Good question, and a question that shows the lunacy of trying to apply a standard to free speech.

On the other side of the coin stand taxpayers who are paying for legislative press releases and newsletters. Anderson's newsletter alone is expected to cost taxpayers between \$10,000 and \$20,000 to print and mail, to say nothing of the staff time necessary to write and prepare it. Multiply that times 98 representatives and 49 senators, and it's easy to see that a lot of public tax dollars are at play here. For what?

Newsletters are supposed to update constituents on legislative action. But the newsletters always make the author look good and effective and powerful. Have you ever seen a legislative newsletter that made the lawmaker look bad? Of course not.

The question is this: Should taxpayers be forced to pay for documents that are "get me re-elected" campaign tools?

So that's the dilemma: censorship versus taxpayer-financed political propaganda.

What's the solution?

One solution, of course, is to stop putting out newsletters, move the partisan staff off campus and make the political parties pay for the staff and mailings. They can say anything they want.

Unfortunately, that's not likely to happen.

The best solution, then, is to put the political caucuses in charge of their own mailings. Attorneys for the Democrats should review Democratic newsletters, and the Republican attorney should review Republican newsletters and press releases.

Having the majority police the minority is unacceptable. Let the partisan attorneys take responsibility for what goes out of their shop, then hold them accountable for their decisions.